UN - NGO Relations : A New Departure?

There are signs that a movement of opinion amongst high officials in the United Nations Secretariat may lead to a breakthrough in UN-NGO relations. Let us look at some of the evidence as it appeared in chronological order.

During the course of 1972, an effort was made to use the occasion of meetings of the UN Inter-Agency Coordination Board in London and Geneva to arrange a confrontation between IACB delegates and a number of invited NGO representatives. Matters discussed were restricted to the role of NGO’s in « development » and « mobilization of public opinion ». These occasions were brought about through the good offices of Stephan Hessel, UNDP and Curtis Roosevelt, Chief of the ECOSOC NGO Section. Follow up on these rather unique meetings, for which internal reports were circulated, seems, however, to have been negligible.

The ECOSOC Council Committee on Nongovernmental Organizations agreed to hold, for the first time, a set of « hearings» in July 1972 in Geneva — to allow NGO’s to express their views on their difficulties in responding to calls to action on the part of ECOSOC. This attempt at « dialogue » did not really succeed — but it was a brave attempt on the part of the Committee and set the stage for later developments.

Then came the October 1972 meetings of NGO’s concerned with the environment at which NGO’s were given to understand by Maurice Strong, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, that an exciting new style of relationship was to be brought into being as a result of the forthcoming UNEP Governing Council in June 1973. This matter has now been postponed to 1974 however (see article on page 414).

In December 1972, in Geneva, a « Meeting of experts on the particular role of the nongovernmental organizations on the mobilization of public opinion and political will » (in support of the International Development Strategy) was convened. Those invited were asked to reply to the ECOSOC NGO Section, although the provisional agenda was under the letterhead of the Centre for Economic and Social Information. The final agenda seems to have been the result of a battle between these two sections, which the NGO Section seems to have narrowly won on points. Most surprising however, was the attendance at the meeting of Mrs Helvi Sipila, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Social and Humanitarian Matters, who took the chair and a very active role. In addition, the Office of the Under-Secretary-General for Political and General Assembly Affairs (Bradford Morse) was represented by Miss Joan Ebert. The meeting and its mysterious report are discussed elsewhere (see page before). The introduction to the report is reproduced here as well as selected paragraphs (see insert, page 413). In the original invitation, the report was intended to be « for the guidance of the ECOSOC Committee on Nongovernmental Organizations in its preparation of recommendations to ECOSOC at its Spring session, 1973 ». We have noted that the contents of the report were however ignored in the Secretary General’s review of CESI/OPl activity (see page 411). Such is the price of interdepartmental victories.

We then come to the February 1973 session in New York of the ECOSOC Committee on Nongovernmental Organizations. The session is described in a separate article (see page 424). There are three surprising things about this particular meeting, which normally is as open to new approaches as the proverbial eye of the needle is...

ASSOCIATIONS INTERNATIONALES, 1973
to a camel. Firstly the massive attendance by key members of the UN Secretariat, who made extremely supportive presentations to the (somewhat bewildered?) Committee. Those presentations included (in order of speaking):

- Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs
- Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information
- Assistant Secretary-General for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs
- Director, Office for Science and Technology, Department of Economic and Social Affairs
- Director, Economy and Social Information
- Assistant Director, Social Development Division, Centre for Development and Humanitarian Affairs
- Deputy Director, Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs
- Deputy Director, Research and Development Branch, Centre for Housing, Building and Planning, Department of Economics and Social Affairs
- Director, Freedom from Hunger Campaign/Action for Development, FAO
- Deputy Administrator, UNDP
- Director, Development Support Information Service, UNDP
- Secretary, UNICEF Executive Board, NGO Liaison Office
- Under-Secretary-General for Political and General Assembly Affairs

Presentations were also made by various non-governmental organizations. The low-status ECOSOC Committee has never seen anything like it before.

The second surprising thing was that the texts of the presentation were actually reproduced in an ECOSOC document (E/5257/Add. 1, 9 April 1973), for its 54th session. (The status of the Committee is indicated by the fact that no Summary Records have been produced for several years now). Extracts from some of the presentations are reproduced with this article (see page 425).

The third surprising thing is that the Committee actually managed to go beyond its narrow concern with blocking NGO’s over the head for not ardently being the UN line on a few currently fashionable issues. Some of the NGO’s difficulties and the need for changes on the UN side actually appear in print in an ECOSOC document (see page 424). Signs of a breakthrough?

We than come to the UNEP-launched World Assembly of NGO’s concerned with the global environment (Geneva, June 1973). This was a very exciting test case, since the Environment Programme must develop a system of relationships with NGO’s and is not bound by the rigid procedures and precedents developed by other UN bodies. The Assembly was deliberately arranged during the first meeting of the UNEP Governing Council to permit dialogue between NGO’s and government delegates on the Council. The result is described in a separate article (see page 414).

The Council postponed the UNEP issue for a year (because of a current review of the Environment Programme’s mandate), but is unable to elaborate. He implies that he has been establishing contact with NGO liaison units throughout the UN system and that the coordination of the NGO question (Was he responsible for the dramatic events in New York?) is under review. He hopes for a breakthrough next year. But the UN is so bedevilled with coordination problems that probably the only changes possible are within the ECOSOC Secretariat (see page 429).

The next item arose from the opening speeches to ECOSOC’s 55th session (Geneva, July 1973). Both the President of ECOSOC and the UN Secretariat-General denounced significant portions of their speeches to a matter which has hitherto been quietly forgotten (not the NGO question unfortunately). The point raised was the need for ECOSOC to address the Assembly. He emphasizes the key place within the UN system from which change may be initiated on the NGO question. (Who are responsible for the dramatic events in New York?) He promises dramatic changes within three months (i.e. for August/September 1973) but is unable to elaborate. He implies that he has been establishing contact with NGO liaison units throughout the UN system and that the coordination of the NGO response to NGO’s is under review. He hopes for a breakthrough next year. But the UN is so bedevilled with coordination problems that probably the only changes possible are within the ECOSOC Secretariat (see page 429).

The next item arose from the opening speeches to ECOSOC’s 55th session (Geneva, July 1973). Both the President of ECOSOC and the UN Secretariat-General denounced significant portions of their speeches to a matter which has hitherto been quietly forgotten (not the NGO question unfortunately). The point raised was the need for ECOSOC to address the Assembly. He emphasizes the key place within the UN system from which change may be initiated on the NGO question. (Who are responsible for the dramatic events in New York?) He promises dramatic changes within three months (i.e. for August/September 1973) but is unable to elaborate. He implies that he has been establishing contact with NGO liaison units throughout the UN system and that the coordination of the NGO response to NGO’s is under review. He hopes for a breakthrough next year. But the UN is so bedevilled with coordination problems that probably the only changes possible are within the ECOSOC Secretariat (see page 429).

The second surprising thing was that the texts of the presentation were actually reproduced in an ECOSOC document (E/5257/Add. 1, 9 April 1973), for its 54th session. (The status of the Committee is indicated by the fact that no Summary Records have been produced for several years now). Extracts from some of the presentations are reproduced with this article (see page 425).

The third surprising thing is that the Committee actually managed to go beyond its narrow concern with blocking NGO’s over the head for not ardently being the UN line on a few currently fashionable issues. Some of the NGO’s difficulties and the need for changes on the UN side actually appear in print in an ECOSOC document (see page 424). Signs of a breakthrough?

We than come to the UNEP-launched World Assembly of NGO’s concerned with the global environment (Geneva, June 1973). This was a very exciting test case, since the Environment Programme must develop a system of relationships with NGO’s and is not bound by the rigid procedures and precedents developed by other UN bodies. The Assembly was deliberately arranged during the first meeting of the UNEP Governing Council to permit dialogue between NGO’s and government delegates on the Council. The result is described in a separate article (see page 414).

The Council postponed the UNEP issue for a year (because of a current review of the Environment Programme’s mandate), but is unable to elaborate. He implies that he has been establishing contact with NGO liaison units throughout the UN system and that the coordination of the NGO question (Was he responsible for the dramatic events in New York?) is under review. He hopes for a breakthrough next year. But the UN is so bedevilled with coordination problems that probably the only changes possible are within the ECOSOC Secretariat (see page 429).

The second surprising thing was that the texts of the presentation were actually reproduced in an ECOSOC document (E/5257/Add. 1, 9 April 1973), for its 54th session. (The status of the Committee is indicated by the fact that no Summary Records have been produced for several years now). Extracts from some of the presentations are reproduced with this article (see page 425).

The third surprising thing is that the Committee actually managed to go beyond its narrow concern with blocking NGO’s over the head for not ardently being the UN line on a few currently fashionable issues. Some of the NGO’s difficulties and the need for changes on the UN side actually appear in print in an ECOSOC document (see page 424). Signs of a breakthrough?
Secretary General asserted on this point that existing obstacles - can no longer stand in the way of a resolution of ECOSOC's constitutional authority within the system. Why is this change of attitude relevant to the future of UN-NGO relations?

A major difficulty for NGO's with concerns relating to programmes of several UN bodies, is that from the UN system side the relationships with each such body are quite distinct and independent. An NGO may be 'interrogated' by several UN bodies on related points because the NGO liaison units within the UN system do not liaise amongst themselves --- to the point that an NGO to one part of the system may not 'exist' or be a people's non-grata to another part of the system. Still worse, however, within a particular UN body, the NGO liaison section may engage in internidepartmental battle with the section of the office of public information charged with relating to NGO's, and so on for each department with substantive interests calling for relations with an NGO.

Therefore, if operational meaning is given by ECOSOC to the Charter provisions noted above, the procedure by which all units of the UN-system relate to NGO's may well come under review. This could lead to considerable rationalization to the advantage of all parties. It could also lead to a review of the peculiar procedures by which UNESCO and ECOSOC (and now UNEP) encourage the myth that the respective Conferences of NGO's are in some way bound to the respective secretariats to the greater glory of all the individuals concerned on both the NGO and the UN system side (1).

The last event in the chronological sequence to date, was the meeting of the ECOSOC Committee on Nongovernmental Organizations (Geneva, July 1973) — the follow up to the exciting New York meeting. What a disaster the Geneva meeting was in contrast:

It was supposed to be a two day meeting (July 4-5) and the issues raised by the previous session certainly warranted the time. At the last minute all the work was transferred to the second day because the government delegates wanted to be present at the opening session of ECOSOC (on July 4th) — which might have been expected. The revised agenda concentrated on NGO action on the questions of racism, colonialism and development. A spokesman of the Committee on Human Rights of the Conference of Nongovernmental Organizations in Consultative Status with ECOSOC was permitted to present a proposal under the first point (2). Delegates debated this paper endlessly so that whatever its merit it effectively rendered it impossible to give adequate time to the broader issues raised at the previous session. To cap it all, after arranging for a working group to review the text (which chopped a further hour off the afternoon sessions) delegates discovered that they had «reservations» which required further debate with many procedural obscurities.

A number of NGO representatives with prepared statements waited hours waiting for the snail-like debate to move on to later points of the agenda. It became apparent in the late afternoon that the question of UN-NGO relations and the «hearings» of NGO's would be examined hurriedly and impatiently into the last few minutes of the session. Having been exposed to this ridiculous procedure in the past, it did not seem worth waiting for a repeat performance.

If there is any inclination towards an improvement to UN-NGO relations initiated from the UN side, it would require a considerable feat of imagination to determine a means by which it could be accomplished via this Committee. The whole procedural style and approach of the Committee is designed to alienate all but the most sycophantic NGO's from any attempt to relate more effectively to the UN system. Is it so utterly impossible to elaborate a more creative and imaginative procedure? But maybe the absence of the February impetus behind the Committee was a means by which it could be accomplished via this Committee. The whole procedural style and approach of the Committee is designed to alienate all but the most sycophantic NGO's from any attempt to relate more effectively to the UN system. Perhaps the absence of the February impetus behind the Committee was a means by which it could be accomplished. The whole procedural style and approach of the Committee is designed to alienate all but the most sycophantic NGO's from any attempt to relate more effectively to the UN system. But even if Bradford Morse can come up with some new formula, how can he expect to upgrade the ECOSOC Committee in the eyes of government delegates? Maybe his «dramatic changes» will only amount to an internidepartmental shuffle? Maybe he really can find a way to set a new style of relationship to the advantage of every whether they work until 1975. Meanwhile, whilst organizations bristle with procedural party. We will hear his proposals when this issue comes off the press — we will not know whether they can be implemented for some time. We will probably not know pleasures, the peoples they purport to represent, suffer increasingly from famine, war, pestilence and a variety of no less painful, if less physical, constraints upon their well-being.

(1) The Conferences are serviced through the kind offices of the UN bodies and not of the respective Conferences and the Conferences must report to their respective Conferences, which are independent of each other. In the UN system, the Conference of NGO's is quite distinct and independent. An NGO may be "interrogated" by several UN bodies on related points because the NGO liaison units within the UN system do not liaise amongst themselves — to the point that an NGO to one part of the system may not "exist" or be a people's non-grata to another part of the system. Still worse, however, within a particular UN body, the NGO liaison section may engage in internidepartmental battle with the section of the office of public information charged with relating to NGO's, and so on for each department with substantive interests calling for relations with an NGO.

(2) E/C.2/CAP. 1. The document was not available to other NGO's present, which made it somewhat difficult to follow the debate.
Follow-up
Results of the February 1973 meeting of the Council Committee

Council resolution 1580 (L)

Under Council resolution 1580 (L), the Committee was requested to submit to the Council, at its fifty-fourth session, recommendations on ways of improving the contribution of non-governmental organizations to the implementation of the goals of the International Development Strategy. In a conference room paper, the Committee had before it the reply to the questionnaire from non-governmental organizations in consultative status « active primarily in the field of economic and social development ». The questionnaire consisted of three questions as follows:

1. Give brief examples of your organization’s programmes already made and being planned that might be considered a contribution to the United Nations International Development Strategy.
2. What practical suggestions do you have for developing more meaningful and productive relationships with the Economic and Social Council to enable your organization to contribute more effectively towards the implementation of the International Development Strategy, for the Second United Nations Development Decade?
3. Does your organization have any activities for mobilizing public opinion and political will on behalf of the United Nations development efforts, including dissemination of information?

The Committee also had before it a conference room paper, the report by the Secretary of the Committee who, at the Committee’s instructions, had visited the headquarters of non-governmental organizations in a number of European cities to discuss with non-governmental organizations their replies to the questionnaire.

As indicated in the three questions of the questionnaire, the Committee had divided its work into three parts: the mobilization of public opinion and political will, the substantive contributions of non-governmental organizations through the consultative process and relations at the field level in technical cooperation and material assistance activities.

After hearing an opening statement from the Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, the Committee then heard from the Deputy Administrator of the United Nations, the Deputy Administrator for Programmes, UNDP, the Director, Development Support, Information, UNDP, the Secretary, UNICEF, Executive Board and Chief, NGO Liaison Office, the Under-Secretary-General for Political and General Assembly Affairs, United Nations Secretariat.

Regarding the work of the Committee, the following recommendations are made:

1. As the Standing Committee of the Economic and Social Council on non-governmental organizations’ matters, the Committee should maintain and broaden its dialogue with non-governmental organizations for the mutual benefit of both;
2. As part of this process, the Council Committee might review with non-governmental organizations the work programmes of the Economic and Social Council in order to ensure that non-governmental organizations are informed about meetings which might be of particular interest to them.

1. Regarding co-ordination and liaison

The Committee recommends that the Economic and Social Council request the Secretary-General, within the framework of Council resolution 1296 (XLI), to consider various ways of improving co-ordination with non-governmental organizations within the United Nations and the United Nations system, so that, in their relationship with the United Nations, non-governmental organizations may most effectively contribute to the goals and objectives. Attention should be paid in particular to:

(1) Developing the various forms of relations with non-governmental organizations at the regional and national levels through the regional economic commissions, the United Nations Information Centres and the UNDP resident representative’s offices;
(2) Facilitating liaison with non-governmental organizations by organizations in the United Nations system through:
   i. Improving co-ordination within the United Nations Secretariat;
   ii. Simplifying the separate relations maintained by different parts of the United Nations system with non-governmental organizations so that their service and productivity can be improved;
   iii. Continuing the exploration of relations with UNDP at the field level in technical cooperation and material assistance;
(3) Exploring ways to rationalize and co-ordinate the efforts of the United Nations system to mobilize public opinion and political will. Better use should be made of national commissions and coordinating committees of non-governmental organizations;

424 ASSOCIATIONS INTERNATIONALES, 1973
Making appropriate arrangements for the Economic and Social Council, through the Committee on Review and Appraisal, to receive the substantive contributions of the various regional and country non-governmental organizations concerning the development process.

Exploiting with non-governmental organizations in areas of their special competence.

Exploiting with non-governmental organizations in areas of their special competence could be more closely involved with the implementation of the International Development Strategy.

The Secretary-General is requested to report on the progress made in these efforts to improve co-ordination and liaison at the next regular session of the Council's Committee early in 1974 and, if possible, to submit a progress report when the Committee meets during the Fifty-Fifth session of the Council to be held in Geneva.

2. Regarding field level operations: Recommendations of Member Governments, when drawing up their country programmes for economic and social development and their project proposals for United Nations system assistance, should take into account the practical contributions, experiences and expertise of their national non-governmental organizations. Where appropriate, professionally qualified non-governmental organizations should be consulted or invited to participate in planning sessions.

Assigned regional and country officers of the United Nations system should take initiatives to develop closer relationships with representatives of the United Nations system in the areas in which they operate.

Tal organizations likewise should seek new ways to improve their involvement in planning sessions.

Bradford Morse takes these questions of relations with the non-governmental organizations in which we operate, and greater collaboration at the fieldwork level. Within each country, therefore, the United Nations system should coordinate its own non-governmental organizations' activities with each other to avoid duplication of effort. By the same token, non-governmental organizations are called upon also to co-ordinate more closely their own efforts where this is practicable and feasible. United Nations development strategies should make special approaches to existing co-operative structures as, for example, national councils of non-governmental organizations or the co-operative networks of official and non-governmental bodies in the field of emergency relief activities. The latter emergency structures should be maintained and used for longer-term development objectives, within the country system should take initiatives to develop closer relationships with the United Nations system in the areas in which they operate.

Finally, Monsieur le Président, ce que je voudrais vous dire, c'est que je crois qu'il y a certainement une revitalisation de l'intérêt à l'égard de cet instrument de coopération que constitue le statut consultatif. Les organisations non gouvernementales ont un rôle essentiel au sein du Secrétariat lui-même. Ceux nous devons peut-être d'abord aux circonstan- ces, qui encore une fois nous forcent à examiner les problèmes de participation, aux problèmes de mobilisation de l'opinion publique, aux raisons de l'impuissance des organes gouvernementaux des Nations Unies à convaincre les gouvernements, et il y a peut-être une évolution du côté des Nations Unies, mais elle est aussi considérablement stimulée par la présence dans l'organe consultatif de diverses personnalités qui sont-elles-mêmes extrêmement persua- daées et convaincues de l'importance de cette participation avec les organisations non gouvernementales et qui ont dans le passé beaucoup travaillé avec les organisations non gouvernementsales. La présence de mes collègues Sirles, qui est, je crois le meilleur témoignage de ce sang neuf, de fait, si l'on veut, introduit dans le cadre du Secrétariat lui-même à prendre ses fonctions et je sais que vous aurez l'occasion d'entendre Mme Sipila à une session ultérieure.

Je voudrais aussi signaler tout l'intérêt que mon collègue Bradford Morse prend à ces questions de relations avec les organisations non gouvernementales et tout le dynamisme qu'il y apporte, de sorte que je pense que nous avons un faisceau d'activités en matière de participation qui ne sont-elles-mêmes extrêmement peu- peu en tout cas par rapport à l'importance de cette participation.
Presentation by the Assistant Secretary-General for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, (Mrs Helvi Sipila)

The Assistant Secretary-General stated that non-governmental organizations were an enormous asset in the promotion of the goals and objectives of the United Nations, i.e., those adopted by the Governments of Member States.

She said co-operation and partnership between the United Nations family of organizations and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), which has taken place mainly at the national level, was necessary to empower the United Nations coalitions and of other national organizations is imperative. Co-operation between Governments and non-governmental organizations is of utmost importance. The contribution to the implementation of the International Development Strategy both in the developed and the developing countries.

Co-operation at the national level between Governments and non-governmental organizations could best take place if Governments would keep non-governmental organizations informed of their needs for voluntary contributions of various kinds in the development effort and would ask their co-operation. This kind of co-operation is actually called for in paragraph 84 of the International Development Strategy both in the developed and the developing countries. Effective partnership and dialogue between the United Nations, Governments and non-governmental organizations calls for more co-operation among non-governmental organizations themselves, especially at the national level, where a great deal of expertise would be available from the voluntary community to serve the needs of the Governments and society as a whole, if there were better channels for communications between the Governments and the non-governmental organizations and more awareness of the benefits of such co-operation and partnerships. This would strengthen their possibilities in the promotion of the aims and objectives of the United Nations, especially in the field of development and prevent needless overlapping and possibly less efficient, isolated efforts.

Presentation by the Director, Centre for Economic and Social Information (CESI)

The Director of CESI public information channels, in addition to the media, was the network of non-governmental organizations — not only the non-governmental organizations who had traditionally supported United Nations activities in so many spheres, but the other influential ones in their national context who could so powerfully affect the implementation of the Strategy.

The Director said that in his view the two kinds of non-governmental organizations should be brought closer together. He mentioned that the national commissions for the Second United Nations Development Decade, which had grown out of the General Assembly resolution 2657 (XXVII), and towards which CESI was extending a greater effort, should be composed of influential national non-governmental groups. This initiative to the media, was the network of non-governmental organizations — not only the non-governmental organizations who had traditionally supported United Nations activities in so many spheres, but the other influential ones in their national context who could so powerfully affect the implementation of the Strategy.

The Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information said the proposal to appoint non-governmental organization liaison officers to the major regional offices of governmental organizations at the regional level. He said that it was in favor of a proposal to appoint non-governmental organization liaison officers to the major regional offices of the United Nations.

Presentation by the Deputy Administrator, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

The Deputy Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme referred to UNDP's growing concern for establishing better relationships with non-governmental organizations. The UNDP's Administrator has stressed this in addressing regional meetings of the Programme's resident representatives as well as of inter-agency bodies and groups of non-governmental organizations.

Presentation by the Secretary, UNICEF Executive Board and Chief, Non-Governmental Organization Liaison Office

Like other United Nations operating agencies UNICEF works primarily with Governments in its programme aid. UNICEF recognizes that government efforts can never be enough and that it is essential to involve voluntary action and non-governmental organizations, not only in extending coverage but in finding new ways to deliver services benefiting children and adolescents which are economical and simple, and give developing countries experience in approaches which can reach more children more effectively and more quickly. Non-governmental organizations can play a key pioneering role in this, if they are willing to be innovative and assume risks, less likely to be assumed by government agencies, of experiment and pilot projects. Non-governmental organization enthusiasm, concern and activities at the grass roots can be an important factor in preparing families and communities to use available government services and also develop their own intrinsic resources, capacities and common purposes.